

File cabinets made from liquor boxes can help you to organize your papers.

A Trip to the Liquor Store



David Michael Bigeleisen is a husband and father, and a solo practitioner. His practice emphasizes criminal defense, personal injury, and "anything else that is interesting, challenging, and difficult." Mr. Bigeleisen is a recipient of the State Bar's Wiley Manuel Award for exemplary pro bono work. (415) 755-1414.

It is December 31, 1992, the last day of the year. I spend the morning doing the last few pieces of legal work that need to be done before the year ends. I call a few clients and friends to wish them a happy holiday. I let the staff go home at noon. I stay on until about 3:00 p.m., packing up the last of the closed files, clearing off my desk, and straightening up the library table. I load the closed files into the back of my car to be placed in storage. I turn on the answering machine, I don't expect any more calls today. It is now 3:00 p.m. I am about to embark upon the last piece of legal work for the year.

I head down to the Golden Gateway Liquor Shop, and greet Mike behind the counter. I have been a regular customer at this store for many years, and more recently, Mike has been a client in my office. Am I here to pick up a few bottles of holiday cheer for New Year's Eve, asks Mike, or have I stopped by to find a way to drown my sorrows after a bad day? No, neither of these. I am still working. I ask Mike for a box of cheap liquor. Real cheap. Mike looks at me funny. He says, "Well, what did you have in mind?" Did you want beer, or wine, or vodka. Vodka is about the cheapest we have." I say, "I don't care, I don't want the liquor, just the box." Mike brings out two, a box that had carried inexpensive jug wine, and one that had held low-grade vodka. Either will do. I say, "I'll take both." I put both in the trunk of my car. What is going on here? I am building for the new year.

Every time that I do a piece of work, I make an extra copy. The extra copy goes into the liquor box. Copies of letters, complaints, briefs, motions, even memos to the file, *everything* goes into the liquor box. It doesn't take too long for the box to fill up. When the box is full, I take it home with me, I take the papers out, and look at them one by one. Very soon I begin to recognize some patterns.

This stack is letters to clients. This stack is letters to opposing lawyers. This stack is letters to insurance companies. This stack contains motions, this one responses to motions, this one pleadings, this one matters relating to arbitration, that one matters relating to criminal law. After a while, the different papers begin to fall into categories. There is still one category left, and this is unsorted. I look at each stack again and I begin to recognize some repetitive patterns.

I have written three letters to clients on the same subject. I shouldn't be dictating the same letter over and over again. Maybe I should just make a standard form, and use it most of the time. If things change, I can modify

the letter; I don't have to rethink things every single time. The same thing goes for motions. Lots of discovery motions are pretty much the same. How about applications for orders shortening time, applications for orders appointing a guardian ad litem, etc.? Similar patterns emerge in the complaints, and the answers.

I go through the stacks again. There seems to be a logical order to things. Letters to clients are placed in order based on how the case progresses. The first letter is probably a pattern for an opening letter that I send to each client when I begin a case. The next one reflects that we have filed suit, and provides a copy of the complaint, explaining what its significance is. These go on through the discovery process until settlement offers, trial setting, and even matters relating to trial.

What about all of the briefs? Years ago, when I first started practicing law, I was able to remember every single case that I had open in the office, and every case that I had handled. If I had done some research that I could use again, or would be a good springboard for researching a new problem all I had to do was look in the old file. I was young enough so that I had not yet placed any files in storage. I carried my entire database in my head.

It has been 18 years now. I do not want to carry that clutter around with me. But I do want to have it available. Each time I write a brief or do a piece of research, that paperwork ends up in the liquor box too. These also are indexed according to category. They go into a big fat binder, entitled Law & Motion. The Law & Motion binder began with one volume. Now there are seven. When an adverse party does a piece of legal work that looks like it is top quality, a copy of that goes into the binder as well. Give the devil his due.

For example, here is a list of the categories from my personal injury ringbook:

- Opening Letters to Clients
- Referral Letters
- Letters to Clients Forwarding Complaint & Answer
- Client's Deposition
- Defendant's Deposition
- Client's Progress Report
- Client's Medical Examination
- Defense Medical Examination
- Plaintiff Interrogatories
- Defense Interrogatories

Request for Admissions
 Medical Management Re: Treating Facilities
 Wage Loss
 Settlement Offer
 Trial Date
 Arbitration
 Closing Letters
 Letters to Defendants
 Letters to Witnesses
 Letters to Insurance
 Companies
 Letters to Defense
 Lawyers
 Report Requests
 DMV
 Medicare

Unsorted

Here is a list of the categories for my law and motion ringbook:

Pleadings
 Interpleader
 Discovery
 Sanctions
 Dismissal
 Quash
 Transfer
 Default
 Injunction
 Summary
 Judgment
 Settlement
 Indemnity
 New Trial
 Judgement Notwithstanding the Verdict
 Advance Trial Date
 Consolidate
 Continue
 Shorten Time
 Lis Pendens
 Costs
 Third-Party Claim
 Assignment Order
 Withdrawal
 Orders
 Rules
 Brief Length

Of course, your categories will be tailor-made to suit your own practice.

Does this system work? You bet it does. Let me give you an example. Three weeks ago, a friend and colleague called me up for some help with a brief. "Just a minute," I said. While he waited on hold, I was able to find the law right on point. I quoted the relevant text

right out of my brief. It was easy. And if you follow this system, you won't have to call me up. You can do it yourself.

You can do a better job, too. Some of the major publishers have come up with systems like this that you can purchase for a large amount of money. But my own work is tailored to my type of practice, and it's fashioned to fit my clientele. It's a lot better quality than that of the book publishers, too.

My staff uses the system, too: I have two secretaries. They have used the ringbooks so much that they automatically know what to do. For example, when an adverse party answers one of my complaints, the staff person automatically sends out a copy to the client, with a cover letter which explains what the answer means, in ordinary terms. The system makes that part of doing a good job easy.

Can you do this task on your computer? Sure, and I do. Each category in the ringbook has a directory on the computer. Here are some of the names of some of my directories:

Appeals
 Clients
 Discovery
 Jury Instructions
 Law & Motion
 Office
 Personal Injury
 Pleadings
 Retainers

Every item within the directory has a number, and the number is written on the face of the paper hard-copy in the ringbook. I suppose that you could do all of this just on the computer. I can't. I have to be able to see and touch the paper, and move it around.

If you follow this system, your liquor boxes won't have to be for cheap jug wine or vodka. Very soon, you'll be able to switch to champagne. (LOIS 105, 135, 345) ■

